

“Operationalizing” the Military Acquisition Community

Time to Return to Our Military Roots

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Operations. Acquisition. Operations is defined by the self-proclaimed rugged individualists who populate it as “the real world.” As in, “OK folks, sit down, relax, and let me tell you all about the ‘real world’ ... Yep, out there in the ‘real’ world things are changing fast. If you are going to survive, you have to be quick on your feet and ready for anything.”

Acquisition, on the other hand, is often defined by those who populate it as the “unreal” world. As in, “Man, it was ‘unreal’ out there today, I thought we would never get out of that briefing ... that guy just went on, and on and on.” Two very different worlds, two very different sets of rules, yet both co-exist in one *military* universe.

More to follow, but now that I have your attention, time for a quick, very nonscientific, important poll – and a simple two-question test (stay with me now ... the poll is painless, and the test is easy – take home/open book/cooperation encouraged).

THE POLL

Which of the two “worlds” do *you* call home?

THE TEST

Which definition above would *you* apply to Operations? Which definition would *you* apply to Acquisition?

First, the results of the poll. If you call Operations your work world and are



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reading this article, chances are you are either: a) attending Acquisition 101 as a requirement for your new staff job working “real world” requirements and this was the only magazine on the reading rack near the exercise bikes ... and you are looking for this article’s thesis (patience ... it will be here soon); or b) you are a friend of mine and I offered you money if you would read it and give me some feedback (other than “Hey Jazz, don’t give up your day job.”)



If you claim Acquisition as your work world and are reading this article, chances are you are: a) naturally inquisitive and really want to expand your horizons; b) have exceptionally good taste in which articles to read while riding the exercise bike at the gym while attending Acquisition 101; or c) hating the article already — just by the title, you figure it was probably written by a silly fighter pilot, and you want to see how often the author went without oxygen.

Two Worlds — Not So Different After All

As for the test, there’s a surprise bonus because you hung in there with me so far ... there are *no* wrong answers. *Either* definition can fit the operational *or* the acquisition world. That’s right. Things are changing fast no matter *what* branch (Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force) of the Service world you live in — and in no one’s world can you fully escape long-winded, way-too-boring briefers. My point? The military operational and acquisition worlds do share many similarities, and they are *not* as different as each would have you think. More importantly, each can benefit in some way by incorporating some of the ways the other goes about its business.

Specifically, this article deals with applying several key concepts that help make the U.S. military operational world work — directly to the military acquisition world. What then is “operationalizing” military acquisition all about — and why is it needed today?

Operationalizing acquisition involves bringing key tenets of operational “front-line” values directly into the program offices of the vast DoD acquisition professional workforce. More specifically, it means, “reengineering” the military focus that has faded against the onslaught of incorporating a myriad of commercial business practices — in the increasingly commercial/business-oriented, but still *military* acquisition world.

The inquisitive reader might ask a few questions here (and for the non-inquisitive reader I will make it easy for you): a) What qualifies you to write on this

subject; and b) How do you propose to bring key aspects of an almost 100-percent military-dominated world, into an acquisition environment that is predominantly civilian/business-oriented? Both fair questions.

From My Perspective, A Dangerous Tide

The first question is easy. I am lucky enough to have had the opportunity to spend 15 of my 19 years in service in the operational world — flying fighters in three major Air Force combat commands (including time in the forgotten war, the big one ... WW Cold War), and of course spending time in the Southwest Asia “sandbox.” I have worked just about every job in a fighter wing from teflon lieutenant to squadron commander.

I am also lucky enough to have spent four years in the military acquisition world. First in the F-16 program office as one of the Air Force’s early Integrated Product Team leads; then on the Acquisition major command staff working requirements; and most recently as a System Program Director (SPD) at Eglin AFB, Fla., in the newly formed Air Armament Center (AAC).

From that perspective, I have found many key aspects of the operational world, if implemented in the boardrooms of acquisition, which would immediately improve *both* worlds. The warfighter would benefit from acquisition professionals who better understood the military operational environment and needs. All of the Services, to a varying degree, attempt to mix/rotate operational experience with acquisition staff work. This is a very good thing, and we need more of it across the board.

This article goes beyond how and when in their careers we assign *individual* military personnel to acquisition billets. All of the Services have some sort of plan/program (some stronger than others) to ensure the acquisition community has military action officers with some level of appropriate “operational” experience. Rather, this article recommends specific ways to bring an institutional-level operational focus back into

military acquisition organizations, helping to stem the insidious, creeping tide of all-out “business-ization” of our combat support forces. This trend toward a total business focus is a dangerous tide, one that if not reversed will one day soon — if not already — create potentially insurmountable barriers and chasms between the “buyers” and the “users.” And a military acquisition community out of touch with the user’s operational needs would be a potentially fatal combination for America.

So here goes — a fighter pilot turned acquisition professional’s ideas on what can and should be done today to “operationalize” the military acquisition community. And unlike the warnings you see on television, you *can* try this at home.

Step 1 (And It’s A Big One) What’s in a Name?

Let’s start from the top with the basics — the SPD (Air Force) and Program Manager or PM (Navy/Army/Marines). Starting *yesterday*, everyone, all Services should refer to the person at the *top* of the organization chart in the DoD program offices by the same name — and I propose they be referred to as the System Program Office (SPO) or *Program Commanders*. That’s right — *Program Commanders*. Make the change to the DoD 5000-series regulation. Sacrilege you say? Commanders only command combat troops you say? I must beg to disagree.

The man who runs the Military Personnel Flight is called commander. The doctor who runs the hospital squadron is called commander. The woman who runs the supply squadron is called commander. The occasional uninformed combat commander may sneer at the “command” moniker of their support brethren, but we all know combat commanders would never even get to the war without such stout fellows as the average, find-them-under-any-rock, logistics squadron commanders. (OK, all you current or former logistics squadron commanders, lighten up, a little humor here).

Everyone in military acquisition should stop referring to the lead individual in

the program offices as “the manager” or “the director.” It is a term devoid of the essence of leadership. The corner hamburger stand has a manager. The hotel you stayed at during your last temporary duty has a night manager. Playgrounds have directors. Church choirs have directors. None of those professions requires or involves the type of *leadership* the 21st century American military will need to keep the world’s peace — or fight and win the nation’s wars.

At all levels of military supervision, on the line or in the boardroom, the focus is not/should not be managing; it is not/should not be directing. The focus is, and should be, on *leading* and *leadership*. Most Services already either credit or equate program directors to some appropriate level of command for many operational and administrative duties. In the Air Force, current SPO directors are equated on officer career summaries as squadron commander equivalents, and they have commander responsibilities for making military assignments for those members who work for them. It would not be a huge leap of faith to make the change from manager/director to commander for military programs.

Likewise, the professional woman, who is running a multimillion-dollar, next-generation fighter/ship/tank organization, is not a manager, she is not a director, and she is not a company chief executive officer. Both the SPO director and the professional woman are *commanders*. They lead and command people *first*. And herein lies a key distinction. The folks in the cockpits, ships, tanks, laboratories, depots, and program offices are not motivated by financial profit — they are motivated by the *mission*. *Missions are led by commanders*. This is a difference the private business and military sectors will *never*, and in fact should never, effectively resolve.

It is time the military acquisition community refocuses, recognizes, and publicizes this simple but vital difference. We are not a commercial business venture. We do not sell our stock; we will never turn a profit. Our bottom line is combat-ready soldiers, sailors, airmen,

and Marines. We can apply commercial practices to our daily business, but we are at heart a military *warfighting* support organization. And what better way to accomplish change in emphasis than to change the name at the top of the acquisition organization chart — from Program Manager or Director, to Program Commander.

The highly touted Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) and its cousin, the Revolution in Business Affairs (RBA) has done an *incredible* job helping the DoD form a clearer vision of what we need to accomplish in the next millennium. The aptly named revolutions have opened doors long closed in the military sector. Both have done much to improve the way we accomplish the mission. And there is still much to be done. I am truly an ardent fan and proponent of many key elements of both.

In some areas of military acquisition, however, the RBA pendulum has simply intruded too far into vital military domains. How we view, what we expect of, and what we call the organization leader in the acquisition community, is one of those domains. Ask yourself one question. Which organization would you rather be a part of: an organization with a manager directing day-to-day activities, or an organization with a leader in charge?

Some commercial aspects of the RBA’s role in the RMA are pushing the military acquisition community too far from understanding and relating to their first and foremost core competency — *being warriors ready to fight and win our nation’s wars*. Warriors wear battle dress uniforms and flight suits on the front lines — and warriors wear blue/tan/green uniforms, and civilian clothes in the boardrooms and support organizations around the world.

In the acquisition world, too often today we are thinking like businessmen, and not like warfighters. We think first of the “bottom line,” and then often as an afterthought, about the actual warfighter. This is caused, in part, by what we choose to call the leaders of our acqui-

sition programs. “Managers and directors” should not and cannot lead and focus the acquisition warriors; commanders must lead them. It is a simple, but vital nuance. And I firmly believe only *leaders* can take our acquisition organizations to new levels of success in the next millennium.

Commanders are the leaders in operational military organizations. Commanders are afforded special privileges, in some cases almost sacred privileges. They are ultimately responsible for their organizations, the products produced, the conduct and well being of their organizations’ members, and the training of their personnel. Everything. It is no different in the acquisition program offices. Yes, in program offices there is management going on. We manage the budgets. Yes, there is directing going on. We direct the tests. In operational as well as support squadrons, however, commanders are also *managing* budgets, and *directing* operations. They are first and foremost, however, leaders of their people and mission.

Running a program office, large or small, involves leadership. Leaders in the military are called commanders. To make this large-scale, formal change will without question take serious senior leadership involvement. It will take time, but big changes are possible. It was only a few years ago we had over 30,000 military specifications and standards. 30,000! Today, thanks to the vision of former Secretary of Defense William Perry, military specifications and standards are nearly extinct in the military acquisition contracts. Ten years ago the Integrated Product Team (IPT) was new, it was feared, it was change, it was hard, and it was different. Today, IPTs are the way we live and work in acquisition. Change is possible.

The many highly qualified, highly dedicated civilians running program offices must also be considered part of this cultural change. They already write military performance reports, attend all levels of professional military education institutions; and deal with assignments and training for their assigned military

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personnel. They are leading their programs just like military commanders lead their organizations. For those civilians at the top of their organization chart, they should also be program office commanders. In fact, the Army already has a highly successful training course run by the Army Staff Management College at Fort Belvoir, Va., designed specifically for its up-and-coming civilian leaders. It would benefit the entire acquisition community to extend and expand this type of formal training to every Service’s civilian leadership corps.

I would further propose to apply this nomenclature *all* the way up to the Program Executive Officers (PEO). PEOs would become Program Executive Commanders. For the purely military Uniform Code of Military Justice and other concerns, the duty would roll down to their military deputies or up to their military superiors for civilian-led programs. This would not be a major change; it already works this way today.

In the meantime, if you are an SPD or PM (or their bosses), use words like lead-

ership and command on a daily basis. Try it, right now, for the rest of the day, for the rest of the week (hopefully even longer)! Every time you see or hear the term System Program Director or Program Manager, substitute *Program Commander*. It will grow on you.

If you have hopes of one day running your own program, and do not have a formal changeover when taking control of your organization, grab the stick yourself. From Day 1, get everyone together and let them know – military and civilian – where you are coming from, how you will operate, what your values are, and where you are *leading* your organization – and most important of all, how you plan on supporting warfighters’ mission needs.

Coach your IPT leaders to be leaders first. Manage when needed, direct as required, but *always*, in every aspect of your organization, speak, preach, and demonstrate leadership first. If you accomplish this, the managing and directing will take care of itself. It is not easy. The payoff, however, will be enormous.

There is much we can/have learned from the business world. This is fact. And there is still much more to learn. But military acquisition will never fully mirror the commercial/business world. It will always be driven by a different motive – and that motive is not now, and will never be, financial profit. Military acquisition commanders, while they share similar skills with their chief executive officer counterparts, must always be military leaders *first*. The time is right to emphasize this point with one and all, by changing all program office directors and managers to program office commanders – *today*!

Step 2 — Say Good-bye to Matrix-Based Organizations

The next step to operationalizing military acquisition is to get rid of matrix organizations now and forever, whenever, and wherever possible. Everywhere, if humanly possible. Today. They are perhaps the biggest single barrier to greater program office effectiveness. The Marine Corps acquisition community has

already moved in this direction. It can be done!

The operational flying world in the Air Force tried a form of matrixed organizations in many of its wings in the 1970s and 1980s. They did not work. During that period, flying squadron commanders did not “own” their war machines, nor did they “own” the men who worked on them. In the 1990s, the Air Force returned to organic flying squadrons. The front-line flying squadron commander now “owns” everything and everyone he needs to get ready for/go to war. The commander is responsible for the training and rating of crew chiefs, avionics specialists, pilots, engine mechanics, administrative specialists, intelligence officers, financial managers, and life support technicians: one person responsible for all of the above career fields, and chances are he or she has hands-on expertise in only one specific skill area (in this case as a pilot). The same logic should also be applied to acquisition program commanders with their contracting, finance, logistics, or other professionals.

If you currently work in a program office and your organization has the resources to retain your talents full time, then the program office commander should rate you, promote you, be responsible for training you, award you, give you time off — the whole nine yards. The program office commander need not have a flight test background to rate and command a flight test engineer, just as the flying squadron commander need not have ever been a crew chief to rate his stalwarts of the line.

You may argue, but what about the small programs that cannot justify their own full-time acquisition professionals of whatever flavor? If the organization is that small, it should/could be rolled up into/with another organization to get the right synergistic mix. At some point, even the most highly matrixed organizations roll up to a common boss. For a few narrow specialties, or a specific technical skill or engineering area, limited resources may dictate a “home” office. Again, this home office of specialties no

one program can employ full time, could roll up to a logical higher-level center or organization, called upon for specific tasks and time periods, as required. But this should be minimal.

What about contracts, you may ask? You do not typically, by policy/regulation, have contracting officers being rated by program managers — at least not without a high-level functional reviewing authority. The theory is program commanders would pressure contracting officers to perhaps violate (I prefer “push the limits of”) laws/regulations in the name of mission accomplishment — and if contracting officers did not do as the program commanders who rated them wished, the contracting officers would suffer at appraisal time. If they did as the program commanders directed, they could wind up in jail for breaking the law.

Perhaps contracts could be handled like a flying wing handles some of its special support or maintenance functions. For example, the maintenance squadron, which does most heavy engine repairs, is a separate squadron responsible to the entire wing for its specialty. Since laws and regulations are involved in the contracting arena, contracting is an area that would take serious, open-minded, out-of-the-box dialogue. It would be tough work, but with the right leadership support it could be done “on our watch.” Or, as Yogi Berra might have said, “It could be done sometime in our lifetime ... maybe even sooner.”

The Pit and the Pendulum

In every era of dramatic change in the American military, from the earliest days when men still wore powdered wigs, a huge, invisible pendulum has always been swinging. When it was time to build up, we built up way too much, started too late, and spent too much, for far too long. And when the time came to build down, we built down way too fast, and *always* way too far. When it was time to go nuclear, we went almost “totally nuclear,” forgetting about our tactical needs. The list is extensive. And each time the pendulum was swinging, the rank and file in “the pits” usually could see where

it was heading, but were often unable (or worse, unwilling) to do anything about it.

Today, the pendulum of RBA and RMA is swinging wide and fast. Before it swings too far in the military acquisition community, it is time to take stock, to make some bold changes, to make several course corrections. At every level of acquisition, recent operational experience in the subject area is needed. Operational experience can only come by exposing our young officers to both worlds early in their careers. And this should not be a one-time experience. We must continue to find ways of providing opportunities to keep recent operational experience flowing through the acquisition world.

We have learned much from private industry, but no matter how we label it, the military is not, nor will it ever be, a commercial business. We can use key tenets of the commercial sector, its best practices, but the main metric in the military will never be real profit — it will always be mission success, destroying the enemy, winning wars. The time is right for the modern acquisition community to return to its military roots by adopting several key tenets of its operational brethren. Make program directors and managers into program commanders. Give the program commanders real authority over their organizations by eliminating matrixed functionals. Demand an increase in the cross-flow between the operational and acquisition worlds.

No matter how hard the pundits of acquisition academia may try, there are simply no commercial equivalents to the military’s ability to accomplish the destruction of enemy air, radar sites, armor, troops, and ships — and its ability to win wars on behalf of the friends, allies, and citizens of the United States.

The time is right. The environment is right. We can be agents of change. It will take courage — *it can be done*.

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